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Beth Kalikoff

University of Washington Tacoma, kalikoff@uw.edu

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REVIEW: Mind the Gap: Stepping Out with Caution in Assessment and Student Public Writing

Beth Kalikoff

Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text. Emily J. Isaacs and Phoebe Jackson, eds.

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. 117 pp.

Re(articulating) Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning. Brian Huot. Logan: Utah State UP, 2002. 216 pp.

What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing. Bob Broad. Logan: Utah State UP, 2003. 174 pp.

Mind the gap.” The prerecorded caution on the London tube aims to protect fast-moving travelers from falling as they leave the train. That caution has metaphorical resonance for those of us who require students to go public with their writing and those of us who assess student writing, which is to say, all of us. Requiring students to make their writing public has become a given in many composition classrooms, while assessing student writing—in our overlapping roles as readers, graders, teachers, scholars, and administrators—has become the high-speed train of our professional work, hurtling us forward, sometimes without enough time to consider where we’re going. Whether we mandate these activities (requiring students to exchange drafts), have them mandated (designing an assessment plan for our program) or, as in most cases, negotiate the ever-contested space between the two, these activities share the assumption that they are performed for the common educational good.

Taken together, these three works ask us to reexamine our assumptions about assessing student writing, requiring students to make their writing public, and theo-

Beth Kalikoff is assistant professor of writing studies in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Program at the University of Washington, Tacoma. She is currently writing about assessment as democracy. Her work on murder in Victorian popular literature earned a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Book Award. Her poetry has won Reed College’s *Hubbub* Adrienne Lee Award and Walter Hall Award, semifinalist status in the *Nation*’s Discovery Poetry Contest, and the Seattle Metro Bus Poetry Contest.

rizing about assessment and public writing. While none of these books can be characterized as admonitory, all bracingly suggest that we have neglected to “mind the gaps” between what we think we are doing and what we are really doing (Isaacs and Jackson); between our professional and pedagogical assessment practices (Huot); and between what we say we value in student writing and what we really value (Broad). Valuable and instructive, these works urge us to step out with a long stride while also stepping carefully, exploring terrain at human rather than locomotive speeds.

Requiring students to “go public” with their writing has become a tradition of the modern composition classroom; many of us have held it as a good that is nearly self-evident. *Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text* asks us to render transparent our tacit assumptions about the benefits of such public work and negotiate the unsettling gaps among purposes, practices, and consequences. Editors Emily J. Isaacs and Phoebe Jackson say that “[t]here has not been enough attention to the ethics of assuming that students will necessarily benefit from such practice; there has been little discussion about the problems teachers face trying to institute such a practice; and finally, sometimes these practices have unintended, even negative, effects on students and their writing or the audience for whom they are writing” (x). Significantly, they broadly define “public” as any readership beyond the teacher. Public work, then, includes exchanging and reviewing rough drafts; gathering final papers for end-of-term collections; publishing collections on paper or on the Internet; presenting at conferences; and creating reports, pamphlets, or studies for other campus or community sites.

The collection’s strongest contribution is its exacting, even excruciating, look at the ethical challenges that advocates of public writing face in and beyond the classroom. “Pedagogical Negotiation of Public Writing,” the first of three sections, grapples with these questions most directly. In “Redefining Public/Private Boundaries in the Composition Classroom,” Andrea Stover uses one of the collection’s recurrent metaphors—that of collision—to consider ways that unprotected borders between the public and the private can damage students and their learning. Similarly, Amy Lee’s “Embodied Processes: Pedagogies in Context” offers an instructive and disturbing account of the way students create and revise each other as well as each others’ written works-in-progress. Maria, a student in a basic writing course, wrote a paper that was both “a narrative and cultural critique” (11) of her rape. Several male students found the paper “too personal,” although they applauded an essay about a “boy’s escape from Vietnam” (13). Ultimately, Maria “felt written on, written about, as a rape victim; her decision to write about the experience was an attempt to control its telling, to compose herself more complexly: at once a victim of rape as well as the agent of how that experience would be represented to others” (16). The well-intended peer-review process cannot operate “equally,” nor should (student) text be wrested from its context.

Shari Stenberg studies the schism between inclusive rhetoric and exclusive action in “‘Why Didn’t You Speak Up?’ When Public Writing Becomes Public Silencing,” a pedagogical train wreck reminding us that Grand Canyons can exist between what teachers purpose and what students experience. These essays ruminate on the consequences of making student work public. The poignant title of “Some People Just Want Their Stories to Die with Them,” by Derek Owens, came from a Chinese American student who articulated resistance to the course “invitation” to publish oral histories on the Web. These students did not want classmates reading their interviews with their elderly relatives, let alone strangers: had they allowed Owens to post their interviews on the Web, “it would have been regarded by their families as privileging the individual over the community” (56). Owens came to understand this requirement and the assumptions informing it as both “presumptuous and insulting” (53); he now differentiates more carefully between the “kinds of student texts that (at least in the context of my own classroom) will often be better left private and unpublished, and those that, because of their social value, really do belong in a public space such as the World Wide Web” (53).

Usually, it is students who bear the consequences of our unexplored pedagogical convictions. Such consequences are borne most forcibly by women and, in a different way, students whose cultural traditions the teacher does not share. These arguments and narratives exemplify the taught, experienced, and lived curricula identified by Kathleen Blake Yancey in *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. It is perhaps no surprise that Yancey’s work on reflection and assessment informs all three books under review.

The other sections of *Public Works*, on “The Virtual Public” and “The Pedagogy of Public Writing,” investigate related ethical and pedagogical challenges in a wide range of arenas. Charles Moran’s “Public and Private Writing in the Information Age” provides a concise overview of the history of student public work in the context of the process-writing classroom. Moran grapples with “a deep conflict” in his own classroom work: “the desire to have students write ‘from the heart’ and the desire to have students publish their work” (35). Wendy Bishop offers a crisply thoughtful exhortation to reexamine the product in the process classroom. Her essay—“Completing the Circuit: Why (Student) Writers Should Share Products”—picks up the gauntlet thrown by post-process theory, a theory whose assumptions she finds a tad premature.

This collection offers a wide range of public sites for student writing, itself a useful pedagogical contribution. While Jason Palmeri and Sara Daum argue for peer reviewing without teachers, they nevertheless provide suggestions on creating a teacher-free zone in the classroom so that students write for authentic rather than faux publics. In “Creating Rhetorical Exigencies: Two Communication Dramas,” Chris Benson and Joan Latchaw write about the ways a computer center and a tech-

nical writing class collaborated on a study of e-mail writing habits on campus and, ultimately, on an e-mail instructional manual. In the second communication drama, students in a basic writing course jettison the planned curriculum after a date rape takes place on campus. Instead, they research and write, presenting their work and grappling, as did their reading public, with the shock waves the crime caused on the campus.

Readers of *Public Works* may emerge with more breadth than depth on the subject of students writing for readers beyond the teacher. For example, it surprised me to find only one piece emerging directly from the pedagogies of service-learning. "The Ethics of Students' Community Writing as Public Text," by Amy Goodburn, is forthright about the complex and racially inflected negotiations some of her students underwent when writing about rather than with the community. But that is the only essay on service-learning, a topic rich with possibilities and far from exhausted in contemporary scholarship. For example, Thomas Deans navigated the pedagogical waters of writing about, for, and with the community in a substantial discussion that identifies many new or reconsidered conversations on service learning. Perhaps, too, some of the essays overdraw the problematics of, say, publishing on the Web. There are plenty of substantial ethical and pedagogical challenges here already: there is no need to spin lesser ones into butter.

Yet a collection of essays has different exigencies, a different trajectory than a book-length discussion. *Public Works* offers considerable strengths of conception, breadth, and execution. Moreover, its authors include student voices, perspectives, experience, and resistance—indeed, two of its authors (Palmeri and Daum) were undergraduates at the time they wrote their essay. These voices, like those in Richard Light's qualitative study of students reflecting on their college experience, give the collection both weight and loft. While the essays in this collection do not tend to be ethnographic in nature, in a range of ways they privilege student perspectives and, ultimately, learning.

Student learning—and our own—is at the core of Brian Huot's invaluable contribution to the literature on assessment, *Re(Articulating) Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*. This book aims "to look at the various ways in which assessment is currently constructed and to articulate a new identity for writing assessment scholars and scholarship" (3). With trenchancy and vision, Huot reclaims "writing assessment as a positive, important aspect of designing, administering, and theorizing writing instruction" (7). Claiming may seem a more accurate term than reclaiming, given that for many generations assessment "has been used as an interested social mechanism for reinscribing current power relations and class systems" (7). And Huot himself prefers (re)articulating to describe the book's purpose, a term he parses painstakingly in the opening chapter.

But why (re)articulate or reclaim? Because originally assessment was a “progressive social action,” intended in part to establish a meritocracy rather than a society in which advancement was based on birth and class. Huot cites F. Allan Hanson’s discussion of civil service testing in China as a source for this early goal of assessment. Certainly *Testing Testing: Social Consequences of the Examined Life*, Hanson’s bracing study of, and argument against, authenticating and qualifying tests, is required reading for all of us who assess student work. The gap between the original intent of assessment and what it has become is one of the gaps Huot wants us to mind. Moreover, he aims to close it.

This sometimes visionary study negotiates gaps between and among assessment sites, and it is about time. Too often our work as scholars, teachers, readers, writers, and graders resembles the little windows in the Advent calendar. Pop open one window or another, but don’t expect to consider two at once. Huot argues, with careful reasoning and bold assertion, for our integrated understanding of assessment across sites, and for their explicit use in teaching and learning. After discussing his overarching notion of (re)articulating writing assessment, Huot grapples, in successive chapters, with writing assessment as a field of study; assessing, grading, testing, and teaching writing; toward a new theory for writing assessment; reading like a teacher; writing assessment as technology and research; and writing assessment practice.

Throughout, Huot argues for “[s]eeing assessment as social action” (175), social action linked purposefully to teaching and learning. Too often the politics of accountability, discussed in both *Re(Articulating) Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* and in *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, wags the dog with such violence that the dog dies. In my own program, a well-intended portfolio system became a pile of dog bones, signifying only that here was once a dog or, at least, a puppy of some potential. Students assembled old papers, dashed off some self-assessment forms on oral communication, then turned the portfolios in, after which they were first unread and then recycled. In fairness, my colleagues are oceanographers and historians, not assessment scholars: they have been swamped with the responsibilities of starting a new campus that has grown at warp speed. They have had until now neither time nor reason to revive the portfolio system.

While unusual in its interdisciplinarity and youth, my program nevertheless points to a truth of university politics and power: (re)designing any assessment program requires faculty time, institutional will, and fiscal as well as intellectual resources. Assessment plans are often hustled together as a kind of sacrifice to the omnivorous gods of accountability. What would it be like to study and practice assessment as a way, as Huot puts it, “by which we ensure that writing instruction

provides successful educational opportunities for all of our students”? (176). Imagine: assessment that reflects and enhances education, providing all our students—not just those who know how to game the system—with equal, and equally rich, opportunities for learning.

There are many ways in which Huot’s book develops our understanding of assessment as social action, assessment that minds the gaps among sites of public discourse. With precision and force, Huot makes a case for much greater interdisciplinarity in the study of assessment. Composition “is a field that welcomes and uses knowledge from various fields and disciplines” (23), prides itself, even, on its multidisciplinary. But we all know what pride goeth before: college English assessment scholarship has little knowledge of the “education measurement community” that also understands writing assessment as its field. In his own substantial career, Huot has “attempted to bridge the gap between educational measurement and composition,” seeing “value in much work done in educational measurement.” Both sides, he suggests, have failed to learn from the work of the other: “while college writing assessment has been isolated from educational measurement, the converse is also true” (30).

Yet the isolation has not had equal consequences for each field. The history of assessment in the United States reveals a positivist emphasis on technology, efficiency, and rationality. Indeed, we still leave fresh produce and live chickens on the altar of inter-rater reliability. Huot notes that while “large and reputable testing companies like the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and American College Testing (ACT)” hire people with expertise in literature, writing, and pedagogy as well as those who are trained in educational measurement, those coming from English or composition—“content areas”—are paid less than the educational measurement hires who occupy more supervisory positions (28). Learning from the “other,” rather than in isolation, will enable us to benefit from a truly interdisciplinary, integrated, and learned understanding of assessment . . . and then to practice our theory across sites.

Another way Huot bridges gaps is by positing a third kind of assessment, one intrinsic to teaching and learning. Scholars and practitioners refer commonly to summative assessment—“which is final and at the end of a project or performance”—and formative assessment—“which is made while a project or performance is still in progress” (18). “Instructive” assessment, Huot’s proposed new category, takes as its subject our (constant) assessment of student work as part of classroom teaching and learning. I find this category extraordinarily useful for every assessment site Huot discusses. Readers who do not wish to catapult themselves into the Professional Assessment World—itself a kind of theme park without music—will nonetheless benefit from Huot’s chapter on “Assessing, Grading, Testing and Teaching Writing,” in which he discusses instructive assessment. “Reading Like a Teacher” also speaks directly and constructively to scholars who do not claim assessment as one of

their fields. These chapters, like the others, are learned and pungent, with the power to change teaching and learning by changing assessment scholarship and practices.

Ultimately and intrinsically, Huot offers seven “guiding principles” for writing assessment practice. Writing assessment should be:

- Site-based.
- Locally controlled.
- Research-based.
- [Guided by] questions [. . .] developed by [the] whole community.
- [Initiated and led by] writing teachers and administrators.
- [Built on] validation arguments.
- Practic[ed] (178)

We have many reasons to hope that Huot is right and to work toward the vision he describes. If *Re(Articulating) Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning* does not ultimately create “a new identity” for assessment scholars and scholarship—the matter is arguable—it significantly (re)articulates and integrates the identities that already exist.

Bob Broad’s study of the gap between what we really value in student writing and what we say we value—his title gave this review its central metaphor—speaks a sotto voce truth about assessment. We assume that our assessment practices reflect our public rhetoric about and private understanding of how we value student work. But on what is that assumption based? Moreover, the rubrics (five points, six points, ten points, a dollar) that articulate assessment criteria, while useful in the past, have been fatally weakened by all that they omit. In a well-conceived and sophisticated qualitative study, Broad demonstrates that teachers use dozens of criteria daily in their evaluation of student work. The alternative means of assessment Broad designed—Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM)—is rather daunting in both name and complexity. Rubrics are easier. But that’s by way of being Broad’s point. Rubrics privilege speed and simplicity at the expense of the power to describe and inform that more nuanced qualitative assessment plans can offer.

Broad’s “prologue” introduces his argument while representing the boldness of conception and wit in execution that informs the whole book. He considers the Vinland Map, a controversial subject in cartography, although Broad does not weigh in on whether the map is a genuine fifteenth-century document or a sensational twentieth-century forgery. He has other fish to fry. The map contained the following information: there’s land there, it’s very big, “[i]t has a couple of big bays on its east coast,” and we can claim it (x). Of course, as Broad points out, the last point of information was not information at all, and the first three points we now consider uselessly general. In a transition I can only characterize as dashing, Broad likens the

Vinland Map to rubrics: “I propose that traditional rubrics are as dangerously unsatisfactory for purposes of contemporary rhetoric and composition as the Vinland Map would have been to Lewis and Clark or to someone wishing to travel Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles” (x). And we’re off.

Understanding the institutional, fiscal, and political pressures that inflect all assessment programs, Broad makes a powerful ethical and scholarly claim for an alternative twenty-first-century assessment: Simply reflecting on what we value in student writing or even polling instructors under our supervision is insufficient, Broad argues, for making “a knowledge claim (for example, Here is how writing is valued in our writing program) that carries with it serious consequences for students, faculty, and society”; instead, “we need to conduct the best inquiry we can. In the rush toward clarity, simplicity, brevity, and authority, traditional scoring guides make substantial knowledge claims based on inadequate research” (3). Privileging speed and cost-effectiveness is unethical and unscholarly. We owe it to our students and our profession to seek the truth rather than merely our hope or a collection of our impressions. Drawing on “[t]heorists of knowledge from Nietzsche to Foucault and beyond,” Broad defines truth as “doing our epistemological best” (3).

Most of Broad’s book describes the ideas, methods, results, and implications of the Dynamic Criteria Mapping study he designed and implemented for portfolio assessment. After discussing the research context—like Huot, Broad values assessment methods that are site-based, locally controlled, and sensitive to context—he describes the study’s methods, which are too intricate to summarize here but involved many discussions, meetings, decisions, and enough transcription to break the human spirit. Broad offers the textual criteria (“What They Really Valued, Part 1”) and the contextual criteria (“What They Really Valued, Part 2”) that emerged from the study and answered the question “What did instructors and administrators in City University’s First-Year English Program value in their students’ writing?” (32). Broad is right to conclude that the “multifaceted, surprising findings of this study strongly suggest the depth of self-knowledge and truthfulness of self-representation that other writing programs could gain by conducting Dynamic Criteria Mapping” (32).

The textual values of the instructors and administrators who participated in this study were divided into textual qualities (“aspects of reading experience”) (34) and textual features (“elements of text”) (35). Qualities included: significance/development/heart, interesting/lively/creative, thinking/analysis/ideas, unity/harmony/connection, effort/taking risks, goals/purposes/intentions, and many more. Features included mechanics, content/topic, sentences, objectionable views, paragraphing, graphics, and more. These partial and decontextualized lists do not convey the descriptive power of the categories and the import of Broad’s analysis. The power of the book stems to no small degree from the detailed discussions it includes of the

faculty and administrator trios evaluating portfolios. The discussions quoted are instructive and revelatory.

If the prospect of conceiving, proposing, funding, selling, and implementing a DCM process for one's one institution is bracing, the prospect of continuing our reliance on the assessment equivalent of the Vinland Map seems, by contrast, impossible. Moreover, the possibilities that Broad's clear-headed and sophisticated study suggests have excitingly diverse applications. They command our attention. After all, assessment is always political and, as George Orwell wrote in "Politics and the English Language," if we do not involve ourselves thoughtfully, there are plenty of others who are more than willing to act in our stead. With *Public Works* and *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning, What We Really Value* gives us ways to mind the gaps in our teaching, scholarship, and learning.

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